

It Changes How Teachers Teach

How Testing Is Corrupting Our Classrooms and Student Learning

Janet L. Erskine

Overview of the Problem

After two decades teaching elementary aged children, I have grown increasingly concerned with the use of high-stakes tests to determine how well students, teachers, and schools are performing. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates took effect in 2002, requiring the results on some standardized assessments be used to determine whether or not schools remain open. This was an attempt by policy makers to reform educational practices through teacher accountability with the use of one-time, high-stakes tests (Ravitch, 2010). The vision was to ensure that children considered at risk of not performing as well as their more socio-economically advantaged peers would have better access to instructional interventions. Low scoring schools must demonstrate improvement. If scores remain low, school doors are closed and teachers can be fired.

Many schools are now trying ways to find relief from NCLB mandates in exchange for efforts to close the achievement gap (ESEA Possibilities, 2013). Most public schools are not, however, finding ways to stop high-stakes tests from dictating curriculum. This testing culture harms most the very students it purports to help (Au, 2007; Neill, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). High-stakes testing impacts our most vulnerable youth—especially minorities and children from poverty—by limiting choices and narrowing curricula to only tested items in order to pass tests (Au, 2007; Ravitch 2010). It changes how teachers teach.

The Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) is used in many Oregon schools to assess students' progress in reading and math to determine if students meet grade level benchmark standards. Scores are then evaluated by the state to determine teacher and school effective-

ness. Smarter Balanced assessments will replace OAKS in 2014-15 (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Updates, 2013). I witnessed teachers pitted against each other vying for students with the greatest potential to score well. Students were looked at as numbers.

By turning students into test scores, I notice teachers taking risks they would have never once considered. For example, in 2008-09 one small town in Oregon showed over 95 percent of fourth grade children with learning disabilities and other identified special needs passing the OAKS reading assessment (Oregon Department of Education, 2013). These were children whose reading teacher evaluated them as working one or more years below grade level. How could children who could not comprehend third grade text pass fourth grade reading assessments?

Further investigation revealed special education assistants inappropriately applying test adaptations that were supposed to be stated on individual education programs. Teachers read entire passages aloud and hinted at correct answers. One assistant was overheard whispering, "Don't you mean to answer B?" as she guided a child's hand holding a computer mouse over the correct response. Moreover, no test adaptations for fourth graders from this school were reported to the Oregon Department of Education in 2009.

And cheating is not unique to small schools. Districts, schools, and teachers all over the U.S. are under fire for similar lapses in judgment. Recently, 35 educators and administrators in Georgia were indicted on corruption charges for cheating on high-stakes tests (Carter, 2013). I propose that the problem is not so much with dishonest test taking—although cheating should not be condoned—as with the misuse of one-time assessments to determine teacher effectiveness.

I decided to return to school to complete my graduate work and, perhaps,

find a solution to our nation's overzealous testing movement. I find, instead, more troubles than answers.

Teaching to the Test

Last year, my then nine-year old daughter returned home from fourth grade upset. She explained that all she did all day was take tests. Her teacher told her class they had to improve their reading and math test scores on the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills to prove how smart they are.

I was confused. For one, my daughter does not need a test to confirm—or worse, deny—her intelligence. Besides, she had already passed fourth grade OAKS reading and math tests in October. Her teacher indicated she exceeded each benchmark test standard with scale scores converting to around 97 percent per test. So, why was she still taking the same tests in December? We needed a conference.

Upon arriving at her school, I noticed the front hall blanketed with charts and graphs. Student names were listed on colorful rockets and pie charts denoting specific practice tests they had passed in preparation for the real deal. Framed academic awards championing the names of children who had already passed their OAKS lined the opposite wall. Another bulletin board in front of a first grade classroom read, "Socratic Seminar: Scholarly Discourse Based on Grade Level Text."

I wondered how children and families felt about this particular item and accompanying research about *Guided Language Acquisition Strategies*. Over half of the student population is English language learners, some who had recently moved to the United States. I doubted they cared about such matters. It is not uncommon for parents in this school to have eleventh grade educations. I doubted they would choose to wade through such weighty text. I couldn't think of highly educated families

Janet L. Erskine is an elementary school teacher who recently earned an M.A. degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

who would spend time with this endeavor, for that matter. Who is the target audience for these bulletin boards?

I followed the trail of test ribbons to my daughter's classroom. Her teacher explained that since the school did not make adequate yearly progress they were in danger of losing funding. As a result, their schoolwide improvement plan explicitly outlined interventions all classrooms must make to be in alignment with NCLB mandates. All fourth and fifth grade students were required to take reading, writing, and math high-stakes tests, some of which included OAKS, three times a year and demonstrate growth each time. That works out to nine test sessions of five days each; or 45 testing days involving 1-2 hour sessions, depending on test takers' speed.

Other interventions required all students, regardless of need, to participate in reading and math remediation for a minimum of 30 minutes on top of their regular instruction. For my daughter, that meant 30 minutes of daily multiple choice and short answer test practice on a web-based program called *Study Island* during her "advanced math" time. She was also required to complete 20-30 minutes of drill review worksheets prior to learning new math content.

Reading and language arts activities proved equally tedious, but I was informed it was out of the teacher's hands. Intensive language arts (and math) homework must be assigned to get kids ready to pass OAKS. A portion of fourth graders' weekly homework included writing 1-2 page essays on a topic of the teacher's choosing. Essays must go all of the way through the writing process: rough draft, edit, revise, and final copy. Students could not select their own topic; but pray they had background knowledge and interest on the randomly selected subject.

In addition to daily writing, students were required to read for 30 minutes every evening, recording their progress on reading charts. Double-sided spelling worksheets and multiple pages of daily math drill review worksheets were also standard fare. That explained the two hours of daily homework—another source of my daughter's consternation with school, although one I had planned to discuss another time. I didn't have to wait. I had the answers. And I am furious.

"We Test Kids to Death... and That's Okay"

I broached the subject of high-stakes

tests and my daughter's plight during a graduate course about curriculum. There was a noticeable divide in perceptions about testing between beginning teachers who worked in middle and high-income areas compared to those in high-poverty schools. Teachers whose schools were not tied to federal funding or whose students lived in economically advantaged areas did not have much to say about NCLB mandates. These teachers and students had the benefit of music and band programs, physical education, elaborate sports programs, field trips, and top of the line technology resources. High-stakes tests did not impact teaching or learning, save one time at the end of the year. According to teachers, their students arrived to school ready to learn and pass tests. Classrooms spent the day immersed in creative instruction and higher-order learning.

After listening to comments by beginning teachers who teach in high-poverty areas, however, I am scared. They look at education through a different lens than teachers whose livelihoods aren't hinged on federal dollars. Creative and higher-order learning is not a topic for conversation, but raising test scores is. If these teachers' comments are an indicator of classroom realities, then our most vulnerable youth—those impacted most by poverty and racial inequalities—will not benefit from the creative instruction necessary for deep learning. It's enough to pass a test.

New teachers explain how they administer practice test after practice test in hopes of raising OAKS scores. As such, they did not have issue with the amount of testing I complained about with my daughter. High test scores are the name of the game. The underlying assumption is that high test scores equate with improved student learning (Forte, 2010).

No Child Left Behind policies mandate all children pass high-stakes tests, usually without regard to disability or developmental readiness. There are no excuses for individual differences. I expected to hear beginning teachers advocate for less testing and demand to be allowed to meet students' needs where they are. Not so. Here is a sampling of new teacher comments to me—teachers in their first three years of work in high-poverty schools—regarding preparation practices for high-stakes tests (Anonymous, personal communication, July 18, 2012):

We test kids to death (practice tests targeted to OAKS' test items), at least four times a week, and that's okay because it gives us good information. We have to get

kids ready to graduate and they have to pass the OAKS to do that. I work with an old teacher who should probably retire. She still thinks it's okay to read to kids (11th graders). We don't have time for that. We have to get kids ready to pass tests. In effect, master teachers' methods are marginalized in favor of teaching to tests.

A fifth grade teacher observed, "Practice tests for OAKS are crazy valuable. This year 21 out of 25 kids passed their OAKS. It's constant assessment. I can't imagine going back." This teacher equates testing with learning. They are not the same.

Finally, a fourth grade teacher explained, "The text is aligned with the standards. Lessons are sequentially planned and scripted to meet standards and kids are ready for OAKS. I don't have to think. It's all done for me." NCLB mandates that teachers be highly qualified in order to teach, however, teachers don't need advanced degrees to read scripts. Instead, NCLB mandates have turned some teachers into drones. These are educators who mindlessly read from scripted curriculum without regard to creative instruction to meet individual needs. If it's not on the script, it's not taught.

It strikes me that an important difference between the type and quality of instruction at low and high scoring schools are in the way teachers are required to teach to high-stakes test items once schools are deemed inadequate. All of the beginning teachers I spoke with received the same education and training! New teachers demonstrated competence with creative, well-rounded instructional practices in schools not under fire for low test scores. Once schools are on the path to restructuring, however, all focus is on one test.

Creative Instruction and Learning Evaporates

Legislators haven't listened much about the negative impact of high-stakes tests on teaching and learning because it doesn't affect all students—yet. Since most teachers in upper and middle class, predominately Caucasian, neighborhoods are not mandated to provide prescribed curricula and interventions, students do not notice much change to curriculum due to one-time tests. Additionally, graduation exit tests are not targeted to high-income districts.

Schools who fail to score well, usually those with high rates of poverty, English language learners, students of color, and students with disabilities, are those required to have exit exams to deny graduation (Neill, 2009). No wonder there

is a frantic rush to teach to tests in some schools, but not others.

I listened to story after story from beginning teachers in my education program explain how music, drama, art, and sports programs were gutted in favor of purchasing scripted curricula to improve OAKS' scores. More disheartening were some of these teachers unquestioning acceptance of prepackaged curricula. Some mentioned fear about making decisions around instructional methods because "they might wreck kids."

Instead, teachers felt comfortable allowing textbook companies to dictate standardized content and methods or hired outside education consultants to do it for them. High-stakes tests serve to simultaneously standardize the way these teachers teach and deskill them. More frightening, many of the teachers I spoke with do not seem to mind. Tom McKenna (2003) sums it up pretty well, "In a world enriched with difference, the hidden curriculum of education reform is singularity, sameness, and compliance" (p. 10). I would add, especially for students who are not White and wealthy.

It's counterintuitive, but it's when the system works well, that is when teachers teach to test-driven basic skills remediation, that more creative, higher-order learning cannot take place. "Learning gets stuck while the system succeeds" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 360). Or, the higher the test scores, the less real learning has occurred.

Drawing a Line between Summative and Formative Assessments

Thoughtful, formative assessment deserves a place in schools. Good instruction can only occur when teachers know what students can and cannot do. The purposes formative and summative assessments serve, however, have become confused in practice. As a consequence, tests are misused and fail to inform instruction or improve student learning (Bennett, 2011; Harlen & James, 1997; Neill, 2007; Ravitch, 2010).

The role of formative assessments is to recognize the positive achievements of students and plan appropriate next steps in learning (Harlen & James, 1997). Formative assessments serve to build on small ideas, provide time for teacher and student feedback with regard to learning, and all the while maintain an eye mastering big ideas. Summative assessments, on the other hand, are concerned with overall program goals for the purposes of recording overall achievement at the end of a course or program (Bennett, 2011; Harlen

& James, 1997). They aim to find out how well big ideas are mastered, rather than the smaller learning leading up to big ideas. Summative assessments may reveal weak areas in student learning but cannot explain reasons why. That's the purpose of formative assessments, which do not have to be intrusive, formal, or time consuming. Many times, teachers can diagnose and help students by listening and talking. No tests or data charts needed.

One of the problems with high-stakes tests is that they are the only measure that determines success of students, teachers, and schools. Quality and breadth of curriculum and learning do not matter. The goal of testing is higher scores, without regard to passion, motivation, and love of learning. And, many schools misuse high-stakes assessments to track students into leveled courses. Tracking which, predictably, favors White middle and upper class students and fails ethnic minorities (Neill, 2009).

In sum, assessment is not an exact science and never can be (Ravitch, 2010). Rather, assessment is more an act of human judgment that should be based on sound evidence and authentic assessment (Harlen & James, 1997).

Where Do We Go from Here

Teachers must be empowered to make decisions in their classrooms. Decisions regarding student placement and grades, many times taken away from teachers and made at district offices, must be returned to teachers who are better equipped to meet the needs of students. Top down approaches of imposing rigid curricula upon low scoring schools should be replaced with creative, well-rounded content addressing all areas of learning and arts. Additionally, training should be provided to teachers that both disentangles formative and summative assessments and explores steps to provide feedback to help learning and improve student motivation (Neill, 2009).

Rather than one-time, high-stakes tests, assessment should include multiple kinds of evidence (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Neill, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Portfolios of student work over time, essays, projects, teacher observations, and student self-evaluations are effective tools to assess knowledge (Neill, 2009). Standardized tests may also be part of the evidence, depending on decisions made by students and teachers.

Finally, NCLB mandates and resulting sanctions serve to deepen the lines between class and race. Schools and communities must hold the government accountable

for adequate and equitable resources for all students. Teachers cannot be expected to provide quality instruction with insufficient resources.

I worry. Have we so thoroughly indoctrinated our public schools—our students, our teachers, our communities—with standardized, bottled instruction to teach to assessment items that we have systematically smothered the creative and imaginative abilities of everyone, test by test?

References

- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: a qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36: 258-265.
- Au, W. (2011). Teaching under the new Taylorism: high-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st century curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37-41.
- Bennett, R. E. (2011). Formative assessment: a critical review. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18(1), 5-25.
- Carter, C. J. (2013, March 29). Grand jury indicts 35 in Georgia school cheating scandal. Retrieved from CNN U.S.: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/29/us/georgia-cheating-scandal>
- ESEA possibilities. (2013, May 30). Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/index.html>
- Forte, E. (Apr-June 2010). Examining assumptions underlying the NCLB federal accountability policy on school improvement. *Educational Psychologist*, 45(2), 76-88.
- Harlen, W., & James, M. (1997). Assessment and learning: differences and relationships between formative and summative assessment. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 4(3), 365-379.
- McKenna, T. (2003, Mar.). The straitjacket of standardized tests: a Portland teacher wonders: where is the standardized test that can measure a passion for learning, respect for others, and human empathy? *NEA Today*, 21(6), 10.
- Mintrop, H., & Sunderman, G. (2009). Predictable failure of federal sanctions-driven accountability for school improvement- and why we may retain it anyway. *Educational Researcher*, 38(2), 353-364.
- Neill, M. (2009). A child is not a test score: assessment is a civil rights issue. *Root & Branch*, 2(2), 28-35. Retrieved from <http://www.fairtest.org/sites/default/files/root%20%20branch%20fall%20-%20MN%20testing%20only.pdf>
- Oregon Department of Education. (2013, May 20). Retrieved from: <http://www.ode.state.or.us/apps/BulkDownload/BulkDownload.Web/>
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium updates. (2013, May 22). Retrieved from Oregon Department of Education: <http://www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?id=8929&typeid=6>